

**Inequality, Education and Open Learning**

by

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Abstract

Inequalities among people are, with climate change, the two major challenges for the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We sketch the history of inequalities and the situations it has generated, with particular reference to the work of Piketty. A review of historical phenomena that have reduced inequality concludes that they have limited relevance today. Countries must focus on the political processes of social legislation, taxation and education in order to create more equal societies. We explore, with particular reference to India, the role of education generally and open learning specifically in reducing inequalities. When the first open universities were created, a primary aim was to enable larger numbers to study, but today keeping costs down is an equally vital contribution to equality of access. The same forces of elitism that combat increased equality in society generally make it difficult for some open universities and open schools to realise their potential. But now that many governments are cutting public funds for education, the need for inexpensive institutions offering open and distance learning is inescapable. The article concludes by commenting on the broader open education movement and the 2019 UNESCO Recommendation on Open Education Resources.

Introduction

Inequality - of income, wealth, status and opportunities - has become, after climate change, the most pressing issue of our times. The two challenges are related because, while extreme weather conditions and the warming of land and oceans affect everyone, resource-poor people tend to suffer more than the rich from floods, wildfires, landslides and other disasters.

In the first part of the article we draw on current writing on the topic of inequality, notably Thomas Piketty's magisterial work *Capital et Idéologie* (2019), which traces the historical evolution of inequality and its ideological underpinnings in the various regions of the world. At the beginning of his book Piketty (2019, pp. 13,15) makes these statements (translation from the French by the present author):

*Each human society must justify its inequalities: it must find reasons for them, otherwise its whole political and social structure will face the threat of collapse...*

*Our historical analysis yields an important conclusion: human development and social progress depend on the fight for equality and education; not by treating property rights, stability and inequality as sacred.*

After reviewing patterns of inequality of income and wealth today, we note how countries are trying to address – or failing to address – the challenge of inequality, notably in education and

particularly through the development of open learning. Starting fifty years ago some governments, concerned about the dramatic inequalities in access to higher education, created open universities in order to harness technology to make higher learning, in the words of the slogan of the UK Open University, more ‘open to people, open to places, open to methods and open to ideas’ (Crowther, 1969).

It was only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, that universities more widely began to include the reduction of inequality in their missions – and then only timidly. We review the state of play at the beginning of the 2020s. The Internet now gives universities a tool to reach out to wider audiences, but reductions in state funding lead them to charge fees that make access less equal. Although they were founded on the assumption that technology could make access to higher learning more equal, some open universities struggle to keep pace with the opportunities that communications media now offer.

We end with a comment on the status of Open Educational Resources (OER) now that UNESCO has passed a Recommendation about their use, though not without controversy (UNESCO, 2019; Wiley, 2019)

### Measuring inequality

The traditional measure of inequality of income is the Gini co-efficient, which dates back over 100 years to the Italian statistician, Corrado Gini. It expresses the degree of inequality among members of a population and is most often applied to countries. A Gini coefficient of 0 (zero) means complete equality – everyone in the country has the same income. At the other extreme a Gini coefficient of 1 (100%) means that one person has all the income and the rest of the population have none.

No country, of course, has Gini co-efficients at either of these extremes. Table 1 gives a few examples of its value for real countries. The higher the number, the more unequally income is distributed in that country.

| <b>Country</b> | <b>Gini coefficient</b> |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| South Africa   | 0.63                    |
| United States  | 0.42                    |
| China          | 0.42                    |
| India          | 0.35                    |
| Australia      | 0.35                    |
| Canada         | 0.34                    |
| Korea          | 0.32                    |
| Norway         | 0.27                    |

Table 1. Gini coefficients for selected countries

This table implies that South Africa, which comes top in this selection, is a country where an elite has very high incomes while most of the population lives in poverty. Norway is at the bottom of this list, meaning that public policy in Norway, through the tax system and social and educational programmes, prevents large differences in income between poor and rich. Although they are close neighbours, Canada has a lower Gini coefficient than the United States, meaning that in terms of income distribution, Canada is more like Norway and the US is more like South Africa.

Because of the smoothing effect of measuring the Gini coefficient over whole populations, it tends to mask extreme inequalities. Instead, Piketty and other researchers often use measures of the proportion of the total national income (or wealth) held by various groups. Much of Piketty's data focuses on the proportions of income or wealth held by the top 1% (sometimes the top 0.1%), the top 10% and the bottom 50% of a country's population. He shows, for example (Piketty 2019, p. 758), that in India the aggregated income of the top 10% of earners accounts for 55% of the total national income. In China, by contrast, this top group of 10% accounts for 'only' 40% of the national income total, although China has a higher Gini coefficient than India. We make two comments.

First, measuring inequalities of income and wealth is difficult because few countries, even among rich nations with sophisticated tax systems, have reliable data for the richest sectors of their populations. Piketty's attempt to gather current and historical data on the distribution of income and wealth in countries around the world is a *tour de force*. But by bringing issues of inequality to the forefront of international political discourse, thereby causing discomfort in some quarters, his work is creating controversy and a lively debate among economists about the best methods for analysing income and wealth (The Economist, 2019). This quest for the most accurate measures of inequality is to be welcomed, since policy proposals for reducing inequality need solid foundations if they are to resist self-interested counter-attacks by wealthy 'haves'.

Second, more granular analyses of the evolution of the income and wealth of particular groups are needed in order to buttress proposals of policies for reducing inequalities, such as affirmative action. For example, as part of his review of the historical evolution of the caste system in India, Piketty (2019, p. 417) shows that affirmative action policies brought the average income of members of the scheduled castes and tribes from 57% of the average income of the rest of India's population in 1950 up to 74% in 2014. (By contrast, the income ratio between black US citizens and the white US population in 2014 was practically the same as in 1950).

Anand Giridharadas (2018), in his book *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, flags the growth of income inequality in the USA in a dramatic manner. He points out that since 1980 the pre-tax income of the top 10% has doubled, while that of the top 1% has tripled and the top 0.001% have seen their pre-tax income rise by a factor of seven. Over the same period, however, the average pre-tax income of the bottom half of Americans has stayed almost precisely the same.

## Combatting inequality

While there is controversy about the finer details, few contest that the present era, the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is a time of growing inequality, both between and within countries. But this is not a steady historical trend. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a considerable decrease of inequality in many spheres and, especially in the period 1950-80, the income gap between the rich and the poor was much less than today. Moreover, in those years economic growth was much stronger than it is today. This begs the question: what can be done to reduce inequality?

Scheidel (2017) brings an historical perspective to this question in his book, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. He looks at four phenomena that have reduced inequality in the past.

- Mass mobilization warfare – such as the First World War.
- Transformative revolutions – e.g. the French Revolution and the Russian revolution.
- State failure or system collapse – as currently occurring in Libya, Venezuela, Zimbabwe and some other countries
- Severe epidemics – such as the Black Death in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

What does Scheidel conclude about the effectiveness of these four processes – and how likely are they to work today?

The First World War – sometimes called the Great War – that raged from 1914 to 1918 killed millions, but it did reduce inequality. It gave workers more power and brought women into the labour force with the concomitant freedoms and autonomy associated with working outside the home. But it is hard to imagine that kind of war with mass armies happening again – and it was a horrible process.

Revolutions are out of fashion today, although mass protests are widespread. Moreover, to judge by examples like the French and Russian revolutions, they do not reduce equality in the long term because new elites quickly replace older ones. Piketty (2019, p. 163) shows that the distribution of income and wealth in France barely changed between the French revolution and the First World War. Russia's Gini coefficient of 0.38, a century after the Bolshevik Revolution, also indicates that communism did not promote equality in the long term.

The same reservations can be made about state and system failure: they often lead to civil war and the poor do not benefit from such conflicts.

Finally, the Black Death killed a significant part of the population of Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and reduced inequality by giving the surviving workers more power. But it is hard to imagine an epidemic on that scale happening again and people would doubtless prefer less harrowing ways of enhancing equality.

We conclude from this summary of Scheidel's inequality-reducing events that we should not look to catastrophes like these to create a fairer balance of incomes and wealth in countries

today. Countries must rely instead on the political processes of taxation, social support and extending access to education, which require consensus and take time.

A perceptive work on the current manifestation of inequalities is *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*, by David Goodhart (2017). Basing his analysis primarily on attitude surveys in the UK and the US, Goodhart documents the political consequences of inequalities – not just inequality of wealth, although that is a factor too – but also inequalities of education and status, leading to feelings of inequality among different groups about the control they have of their own lives. These feelings of inequality are the major driver of populist politics, and were expressed clearly in the election of Trump in the US and the Brexit vote in the UK.

Populism combines nostalgia for the past, lack of trust in experts and institutions, a desire to divide and, above all, hostility to whatever can be labelled elite, usually by an accuser from another elite. Populism can develop on either side of the conventional left/right political spectrum. Its common factor is an attempt to mobilise ordinary people against elites that are perceived to be self-serving. Right-wing populism also accuses these elites of coddling a third group, usually immigrants and other minorities.

Goodhart's analysis leads him to distinguish two broad groups within the populations of the UK and the US. A '*somewhere*' is a person who is rooted in a particular community or country; he or she has not travelled much and does not have a higher education. An '*anywhere*' is someone who is globally mobile and often has a university degree. Goodhart explains the rise of populism, the election of Trump and the UK Brexit vote as a rebellion of the '*somewheres*' against being ruled by the '*anywheres*'.

Piketty (2019, p. 844) shows how this division is shaking up traditional political loyalties in western countries. Until about 1970, left-of-centre political parties in Europe and the US relied mostly on the votes of the working classes. But since the 1980s, these parties have increasingly become the choice of those with university degrees. In the UK, disaffected workers played a key role in the vote to leave the European Union and in the 2019 election victory of the Tory party – usually considered to be the party of the rich.

### Inequality and education

What is the role of education in reducing inequality? How do open learning and the wider open education movement fit into it? Piketty (2019, p. 622) states that, 'beyond the role of the legal and fiscal systems, the education system plays a crucial role in creating primary inequalities. In the long term, it is above all access to qualifications and knowledge that reduces inequalities, both within countries and internationally'.

For India, Piketty (2019, p. 423) shows that those regions of the country that have pursued land reform and invested more public funds in education and health have enjoyed faster economic and social development than the rest of the country. This is in a context where India as a whole has a history of underinvesting in health and education. In recent years, for instance, India's public

spending on health has been barely 1% of national revenues, compared to 3% in China and 8% in Europe. Quoting work by Drèze and Sen (2013), Piketty (2019, p. 420) observes that the refusal of richer Indians to pay the taxes required to fund social programmes is due in part to a Hindu culture that favours elitism and inequality, although the quota/reservation system partly disguises this. He discusses at some length the knotty issues raised by India's system of applying access quotas to higher education and political posts (2019, pp. 410), but these are beyond the scope of this article.

As previously noted, economic growth in western countries was stronger during the period 1950-80 than it is today. During that time, even in the US, those with high incomes paid high taxes under a progressive tax system. Economic growth began to slow from the 1980s, after tax systems in western countries became less progressive because leaders such as Reagan and Thatcher spread the erroneous notion that high taxes on the rich hindered economic growth by discouraging entrepreneurial zeal.

As countries moved away from progressive tax systems, one result was to reduce the public funds available for social programmes. Education faces a double whammy, because governments of countries with ageing populations are obliged to increase funding to health and pensions, thus leaving less money for education. Using the argument that the private benefits of higher education for the student are at least as great as the public benefits of having much of the population qualified at tertiary level, some governments have cut public funds to universities particularly savagely. This has increased inequality of access to conventional campus universities, particularly in the US (Piketty 2019, p. 624).

The main aim of first wave of open universities, beginning with the creation of the UK Open University (UKOU) in 1969, was to increase the very limited capacity of higher education systems at that time, when the transition to mass higher education had barely begun. Increasing capacity is still a key purpose, even now that conventional higher education systems have expanded greatly. Perversely, the UKOU had to charge fees from its inception, although at that time the UK's campus universities were effectively cost free to students. Today, however, an important role for the UKOU and all other open universities is to provide opportunities for higher learning of quality that are more affordable than attendance on campus as well as being more accessible.

India is a leader in open and distance learning (ODL), both in its application at secondary level through the National Institute of Open Schooling (Rajagopalan, 2011) and also through its network of open universities at national and state level. Rajagopalan (2007) reviewed the development of India's state open universities from 1982 onwards, finding that they had started off well with many programmes and dynamic leadership during the first few years. By the 2000s, however, he observed that 'a situation of complacency and bureaucratic control dominated the scene'.

More recently Prasad (2018, p. 6), in his book on ODL in higher education in India, uses the Sanskrit words *dharma* and *karma* to distinguish between the 'principles that guide us to do the

right things' (dharma) and present practices (karma). The two words are used in the secular sense of right conduct and actual practice. An important theme of his book is the disconnect that he perceives between dharma and karma in ODL in India and how it might be repaired.

The essence of the dharma of ODL is reducing inequality in the wider society. But in the karma of actual practice, attitudes that favour elitism and inequality, in both higher education institutions and among the general public, make it challenging for open universities to achieve prestige. We noted earlier Piketty's (2019, p. 420) observation that such attitudes are particularly prevalent in Hindu culture.

Daniel (2018) has followed up on Prasad's analysis and also provided a wider review of the situation of open universities in the contemporary world. This situation is characterised by considerable diversity. He notes (Daniel, 2019) that 'some open universities have forged ahead, others have struggled to get off the ground, while yet others have encountered serious difficulties after decades of successful operation'.

Whatever the present difficulties and challenges for some open universities, it is clear that if they implement their missions effectively they have a unique role in combatting inequality. Looking at this from an African perspective, Alabi (2019) comments:

*'ODL is a key vehicle to address access to education at all levels, particularly tertiary level; it brings with it quality of curriculum and content, educational resources that match changing behavioural and technological requirements, and the flexibility that allows a combination of work and learning. The combination of work and learning can drive the achievement of practical, useful and applied education that meets the needs of the people. ODL can also contribute to the achievement of gender parity, one of the UN's 2030 goals in higher education, because it can allow women to balance work and family life with learning. Moreover, ODL can be used in an innovative way to revive skills-based education through competency-based learning.'*

#### Open Education: a broader concept

Open learning, as expressed through open schools and open universities, is part of the wider open education movement, which has the removal of inequalities as its guiding principle. Proponents of open education believe that everyone in the world should have access to high-quality educational experiences and resources, and they work to eliminate barriers to this goal. Promoting collaboration is central to open education: 'sharing is probably the most basic characteristic of education: education is sharing knowledge, insights and information with others, upon which new knowledge, skills, ideas and understanding can be built' (Open Education Consortium, 2019).

Three manifestations of open education are the open source movement for sharing software, the open research movement for making the results of research and scholarship freely available, and the open educational resources movement. Some comments on the recent history of open educational resources (OER) are an appropriate way to conclude this article, because the history

of OER illustrates well the inherent tensions between ideologies supporting inequalities and attempts to combat inequalities.

The term ‘Open Educational Resources’ was coined in 2002 at a UNESCO meeting convened to discuss the implications of the OpenCourseWare initiative of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. That event defined OER as: ‘the open provision of educational resources, enabled by information and communication technologies, for consultation, adaptation and use by a community of users for non-commercial purposes’. The meeting generated considerable eagerness and the ‘wish to develop together a universal educational resource available for the whole of humanity... they hope that this open resource for the future mobilises the whole of the worldwide community of educators’ (UNESCO, 2002).

This enthusiasm sparked a movement, marked by various milestones, that has steadily gathered momentum ever since. A vital step, also in 2002, was the creation by Lawrence Lessig and colleagues of the Creative Commons licenses. These licenses allow creators to communicate which rights they reserve and which rights they waive for the benefit of recipients or other creators. Creative Commons licenses do not replace copyright but are based upon it (Creative Commons, 2019a). These licenses have become by far the most widely used mechanism for defining OERs.

Another early milestone was the Cape Town declaration of 2007, which arose from a ‘small but lively meeting’ whose aim was to accelerate efforts to promote open resources, technology and teaching practices in education (The Cape Town Open Education Declaration, 2007). Great assistance to the OER movement was provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (W&FHF) which championed it, provided considerable funds to institutions developing OER and in 2008 expanded the earlier UNESCO definition of OER to: ‘teaching, learning and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others. OER include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials or techniques used to support access to knowledge’.

The W&FHF supported another advance by supporting the organisation by UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning of a congress of OER stakeholders (not a formal inter-governmental conference) held in Paris in 2012 (UNESCO, 2012). The resultant Paris OER Declaration 2012 was directed primarily at governments and stimulated considerable governmental interest in OER and public support for various initiatives. A further stakeholder congress was held in Ljubljana in 2017 (UNESCO, 2017).

Throughout this period, the rapid development of information and communications technology was creating turmoil in the media industry. The notion of freely available and adaptable resources was obviously unwelcome to businesses based on collecting rents from the use of copyrighted materials. These tensions came to a head when UNESCO approved a Recommendation on OER at its 40<sup>th</sup> General Conference in November 2019 (UNESCO, 2019). A prior ‘writing meeting’ with stakeholders, held in May 2018, had produced a public draft

document (UNESCO, 2018). This was followed up by an Intergovernmental Meeting for the Draft Recommendation in May 2019.

Some stakeholders expressed surprise and dismay that the Recommendation approved at the UNESCO General Conference contained ‘extraordinarily significant changes’ from the 2018 public draft document (Wiley, 2019). These changes could be read to mean that users could no longer retain certain OERs but only rent them for a limited period. Only time will tell whether these changes will mean much in practice.

For its part, Creative Commons is confident that, despite the loss of the word ‘retain’ from an early draft of the Recommendation, the ability to keep copies of OERs is not at risk (Creative Commons, 2019b). According to Green (2019): ‘The CC licenses are clear that “retain” is one of the granted permissions. To the extent that governments use CC licenses to openly license OER, the legal permission to “retain” will not be a problem. Additionally, given the additional rights granted, which all necessarily imply the making of copies, that concern should not be a problem in practice’.

### Conclusion

Education is a primary means for reducing inequalities. Technology-based open and distance learning is a tool of choice for this purpose because it can provide quality education to large numbers at low cost. Because of their scale and the greater complexity of their teaching and learning systems, ODL institutions need better leadership and management than conventional campuses. They also require consistent political support, because the ideologies used to justify inequality will always resist the principles and practices of open education.

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